

Record visitation of 18.8 million reported in 2016

In its 2016 Centennial year, North Carolina State Parks enjoyed record visitation of 18.8 million, a nine percent increase over the 17.3 million visitors the previous year.

Among 39 state parks and state recreation areas, 31 reported increases in visitation in 2016. William B. Umstead State Park in Wake County reported the highest visitation at 1.84 million, a 38 percent increase over 2015, and was among six state park units logging more than a million visitors.

Visitation at state parks and state recreation areas has increased more than 49 percent in the past 10 years. In 2006, 12.6 million people visited state park units.

The state parks system achieved the record attendance despite closings due to Hurricane Matthew in early October and wildfires in western parks a month later. In the aftermath of the hurricane, 25 state parks were at least temporarily closed, and in November, eight state parks were closed to allow personnel to help contain wildfires at Chimney Rock and South Mountains state parks.

First Day Hikes draw 2,049 visitors

Despite chilly, soggy New Year's Day weather, 2,049 visitors collectively hiked 4,952 miles on the 2017 First Day Hikes event, with guided hikes offered Jan. 1 in every state park and state recreation area.

Throughout the system, 55 hikes were arranged by park rangers and volunteers.

Chimney Rock State Park had the "first" First Day Hike with 75 visitors making the 6.5-mile trek up and down the park's entrance road starting at 12:01 a.m. Carolina Beach State Park attracted 190 hikers for a two-mile stroll, and 125 runners joined the 2nd Annual First Day 5K Run at Haw River State Park.

This was the sixth year that North Carolina State Parks staged First Day Hikes, although the tradition began at Eno River State Park in the early 1970s.

For 2017, hikers enjoyed an added bonus by adding their mileage to the North Carolina State Parks 100-Mile Challenge – to walk, hike, cycle or otherwise explore 100 miles in the state parks.



Hurricane, wildfires challenge state parks

A hurricane in October and two major wildfires just one month later presented challenges for North Carolina State Parks.

Hurricane Matthew came ashore in southeastern areas Oct. 8, bringing rainfall of up to 15 inches. During and after the storm, 25 of the system's 41 state park units were at least temporarily closed to visitors, with the storm's effects reaching as far west as Morrow Mountain State Park in Stanly County and Stone Mountain State Park in Wilkes County. Damage was limited to downed trees, washed out trail sections and other effects of flooding. Numerous campsites and boat ramps were closed for several weeks.

With personnel still engaged in storm cleanup, twin wildfires erupted in drought conditions at Chimney

Continued Other Side



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Rock and South Mountains state parks in early November.

On Nov. 5, what became known as the Party Rock Fire was spotted at Chimney Rock State Park. The fire's interface gradually moved beyond park property, threatening populated areas of the Town of Lake Lure and the Village of Chimney Rock. Ultimately, 7,142 acres were covered by the fire, including 2,489 acres within the state park.

On Nov. 6, a wildfire began near the Chestnut Knob Trail at South Mountains State Park, well within the park, although the blaze eventually threatened scattered homes just outside the park's boundary. The fire's footprint eventually covered 6,435 acres, making it the largest-ever wildfire within the state parks system.

The simultaneous wildfires prompted response by about 65 state parks personnel, including rangers, maintenance mechanics, natural resource managers and administrators. The North Carolina Forest Service – in charge of wildfire containment – was assisted by teams from other states. Both fires were contained by the end of November with no damage to park structures.

Important Carolina bay added to conservation lands

A forested Carolina bay in Robeson County has been preserved and could eventually be added to the state parks system, thanks to a partnership with Audubon North Carolina and The Conservation Fund. The 977 acres of Warwick Mill Bay near Lumberton is a significant nesting site for the federally-threatened wood stork and other wading birds.

The Conservation Fund recently purchased the property in the Lumber River Basin and intends to transfer it to North Carolina State Parks for possible designation as a state natural area once a grant from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund is available. Significant funding for the \$1.3 million acquisition has been provided by the North Carolina Environmental Enhancement Grants Program, the Cleanwater Management Trust Fund, and generous private support from Fred and Alice Stanback.

Warwick Mill Bay is one of the state's few remaining large, relatively undisturbed Carolina bays. Several state parks are located on Carolina bays including Lake Waccamaw, Singletary Lake and Jones Lake, and some smaller, dry bays are located within southeastern parks.

Audubon NC plans to work closely with North Carolina State Parks to develop a long-term conservation and management plan for the property to preserve its ecology, water quality and cultural values.

"The Warwick Mill Bay has been a conservation priority for the state for the last three years because of the high quality breeding habitat it provides, and we are honored to help facilitate its purchase to meet the needs and the goals of North Carolina State Parks and Audubon NC," said Bill Holman, the Conservation Fund's North Carolina state director.

State parks projects supported through trust fund

Land acquisition projects at six state parks and seven significant capital projects were funded in whole or in part by the N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund Authority in November. The projects will be supported with an \$8.9 million share of the trust fund designated for state parks.

The land acquisition projects totaling \$2.2 million include \$800,000 to expand New River State Park with the purchase of a former private campground at the Kings Creek Access, and \$1.7 million toward the total cost of an expected addition of 114 acres at Lake James State Park. Other funding will be directed to projects at Chimney Rock, South Mountains, Lumber River and Elk Knob state parks.

The capital funding of \$6.7 million includes support for such projects as trail structures at Chimney Rock State Park, a campground bathhouse at Cliffs of the Neuse State Park and a trail bridge at Lake James State Park that will link visitor areas at Paddy's Creek and Longarm Peninsula. Also, \$300,000 was set aside to begin repairs at Carvers Creek State Park where heavy flooding in October damaged a dam and nearby structures.

North Carolina State Parks Director Mike Murphy briefed the authority about recent division activities, including centennial-related events and the popular state parks presence at the North Carolina State Fair. He also noted that the state parks system has begun planning to host the 2017 Association of Southeast State Park Directors conference in Winston-Salem.

The Steward is an e-newsletter of the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. To learn how to subscribe to the complete version and have news of the North Carolina state parks sent directly to your email inbox, scan the QR code here with a smartphone app or visit www.ncparks.gov, and click "News."

